

## An Assessment of Group Differences in High School Students' English Learning in HaiAn County

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2016.v7n6p173

### Abstract

*In our sample study population of a class of Chinese students learning English, a wide range of performance was found. Based on tests scores the students were divided into three categories, namely, excellent, average and below average. In order to find the reasons leading to the differences and find ways to make change on the average and below average students, we took English learning as an example. Through administered questionnaires, interviews with students, and data analysis, we found motivation, self-efficiency, study tactics and appropriate class behaviors the main reasons that led to the differences in students' examination scores. Based on these different factors a variety of recommendations was made for improving students' English language learning experience and performance in tests, which will ultimately enhance their chances for more prosperous career paths.*

**Keywords:** group difference; self-efficiency, study tactics

### 1. Introduction

In our study of student performances in an English language, we find examined three categories of students (excellent, average and below average students). The objective of the study was to ascertain the reasons accounting for the differential student performances in order to enhance learning for all categories of students in the class. From this result, we will be able to encourage the excellent students to continue in the same trajectory, while finding ways to help the average and below average students to do better and thereby secure a brighter future for them. Opportunities for upward mobility in Chinese society are limited in view of large populations. Therefore, progress in education or career life is highly competitive, and as such it is the concern of parents and schools alike to ensure their children/students are doing well on all test scores. In these students, our sample population consists of English language students in the second grade of a senior middle school

### 2. Definition of Different Groups

#### 2.1 What do we mean by excellent students?

The designation excellent does not mean that a student is excellent in every facet of life, such as intelligence, emotion stability, academics, physical health and so on. For the purpose of this research, excellent refers primarily to great ability in acquiring competence in English language as demonstrated by high scores in English language tests. Thus, our definition of excellence, on the one hand, deviates ever so slightly from that Hongyu Zhou, who writes, "Excellent students are those who are good at study and relatively excellent in intelligence, examination score, morality and behavior in life and so on" (Hongyu Zhou, 2009.). On the other hand, it is closer to Luqman Michel's definition, who notes, "An excellent student is therefore one who is a student being prepared, enjoying learning, confident, paying attention in class, and is respectful to the teacher and willing to learn" ("Excellent student," March 12, 2013).

#### 2.2 What do we mean by average students?

Average students are less likely to attract attention because there is nothing extraordinary about them. Thus, even in academic work, there are fewer chances of researches conducting researches that focus on them. Nevertheless, I am

persuaded that it is important to average students, even much more so than those in the bracket of excellent and below average because more often than not they constitute the bulk of any given population of students.

For this paper, I regard average students as those who demonstrate median level competences in English language acquisition as demonstrated in average levels scores that range between 35% and 75%. Libo Zhu (2011), writing on this category of learners, divides them into three groups: "The first is having good intelligence but not strong in will, not steady in emotion and do not like to find good method in study. The second is not so good in intelligence but good at nonintellectual factors; they study hard but abilities in learning new knowledge is limited. The third are those who are not only lacking intellectually but also lack strong motivation for studying, which make it impossible for them to be excellent." So this research sets out to discover the reasons of their mediocre performance.

### 2.3 What do we mean by below average students

To say that this group of students is below average in their scores in learning English language learning tests has nothing to do with their intelligence. There are a variety of reasons that could lead to low scores in English tests, some of which may include motivation, interesting, and foundation in early child education. ChuanWuXiong (2005,4) has sub-divided category of students into three groups: the first one is those who are performing very well in other subjects such as mathematics, physics and so on, but performing very poor in English language learning. This means that these students are intelligent, but are not good in language learning. The second group consists of those whose performance in all subjects is poor, possibly indicative of the fact that they are poor in intelligence. Nonetheless, we do not want presume the accuracy of the postulations of Hongyu Zhou, Libo Zhu, or Hongyu Zhou, hence the need to research and come with reasons the poor performance of these students on their English language examination tests. The outcome of this study will then provide a resource for those who teach English as a second language in China to enable them facilitate greater learning among a greater percentage of the student population. This will in line with the proposition of Xinbing Luo (2009) that teachers should help poor performing students acquire better learning methods and improve learning efficiency, and thus lower their anxiety.

## 3. Research Process

In process of carrying out this research, various research instruments were developed and used; these include questionnaire and interview. The case study approach was the key methodology. Data collected was collated and subsequently analyzed.

### 3.1 Selection of research samples

We selected 248 students in grade two in eight classes in NanMo Senior Middle School of HaiAn County in China as research samples, we handed out 248 questionnaires and 100% of them were returned. A broad distribution of the students based on the returned questionnaires is displayed Table 2-1 below:

**Table 2-1** List of investigation

Item	category	number	ratio
sex	male	129	52.65%
	female	116	47.35%
Art or science	art	88	35.92%
	scienc	157	64.08%
Student group	Excellent students	19	7.76%
	Average students	113	46.12%
	Backward students	113	46.12%

**Table 2-2** The distribution of male and female students

sex	excellent	average	backward	total
male	26.32%	43.36%	66.37%	52.65%
female	73.68%	56.64%	33.63%	47.35%

In the questionnaire, there are 69 questions that connect students' study attitude, emotion, self-recognition, study habits and so on. Also, I used lunch break time to interview 30 students. Similarly to explore deeper into the learning experiences of the excellent, average, and below average students, two students from each of this categories were selected as case studies for further interview.

### 3.2 Data analysis

#### 3.2.1 Analysis of learning motivation

From the data of investigation, we can see that most students have stronger instrumental motivation than internal motivation. About 80% students chose getting higher score in the College entrance examination, finding a good job in future and for studying abroad as their motivation for English learning. Only 29.8% students indicated their inert desire to learn English as their motivation for study alongside their future career ambition. Some students even indicated that they were forced by parents to enroll in English language class. The research has shown that the excellent students consist largely of those who have internal, rather than instrumental motivation.

#### 3.2.2 Attribution of not ideal Achievement

**Table: 2-3** Attribution of not ideal Achievement

Group	Excellent	Count	Non-ideal achievement attribution			Total
			Lack of Diligence in Learning	Due to parents Or teacher	Hard to learn	
		Count	15	3	1	19
		Expected Count	15.7	1.1	2.3	19.0
		% within	78.9%	15.8%	5.3%	100.0%
	Average	Count	90	8	14	112
		Expected Count	92.3	6.4	13.3	112.0
		% within	80.4%	7.1%	12.5%	100.0%
	backward	Count	96	3	14	113
		Expected Count	93.1	6.5	13.4	113.0
		% within	83%	2.7%	12.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	201	14	29	244
		Expected Count	201.0	14.0	29.0	244.0
		% within	82.4%	5.7%	11.9%	100.0%

**Table:2-3** Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.538 <sup>a</sup>	4	.162
Likelihood Ratio	6.074	4	.194
Linear-by-Linear Association	.070	1	.791
N of Valid Cases	244		

a. 2 cells (22.2%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.09.

From the Table 2-3 students of the three groups all attribute their non-ideal achievement to not studying hard enough. All of them think they would make greater progress if they study harder. The ratio of the excellent group which selected their reason for studying English as being due to teacher and parental influence is bigger than other two groups. While a higher percentage of the lower achieving students (the average and below average) than that of the excellent student indicated that "English language is too difficult to learn."

#### 3.2.3 Self-evaluation on learning ability

On the evaluation of their English language learning abilities, 57.9% excellent group of students chose "good"; 36.8% selected ok, whole no student in this group chose either very good or very bad. 6.2% of average student and

2.7% of below average students chose very good or very bad respectively. About 50% of average and backward students indicated that their English language learning abilities are average.

Finding by Chi square test (table :2-4), Different groups' self-evaluation on their learning abilities has Significant difference(sig<0.05).

**Table 2-4** Self-evaluation on learning ability

**Learning ability self-evaluation Crosstabulation**

Group	Excellent	Count	Learning ability self-evaluation				Total
			Very good	good	average	bad	
Excellent	Count	0	11	7	1	19	
	Expected Count	.8	3.9	10.4	4.0	19.0	
	% within	0%	57.9%	36.8%	5.3%	100.0%	
Average	Count	7	31	62	13	113	
	Expected Count	4.6	23.1	61.8	23.5	113.0	
	% within	6.2%	27.4%	54.9%	11.5%	100.0%	
Backward	Count	3	8	65	37	113	
	Expected Count	4.6	23.1	61.8	23.5	113.0	
	% within	2.7%	7.1%	57.5%	32.7%	100.0%	
Total	Count	10	50	134	51	245	
	Expected Count	10.0	50.0	134.0	51.0	245.0	
	% within	4.1%	20.4%	54.7%	20.8%	100.0%	

**Table:2-4** Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp.Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	44.138 <sup>a</sup>	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	44.368	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	29.590	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	245		

a. 5 cells (41.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .78.

### 3.2.4 English learning effort

Effort is an important factor in determining students' English academic performance. 42.1% of the top students are very diligent in learning English, indicating that they worked "very hard," and 36.8% of the same group indicated they worked "hard." All of the below average students think are not diligent in studying English, as only 7.1% indicated they worked "very hard," and only 24.8% of them said they worked "hard," while the majority of them said their effort was "general."None of the below average students (0%) indicated they worked "very hard" in their English language class and only 15% of them indicated they worked "hard." See Table 2-5 below:

**Table:2-5** English learning effort statistics

**Group:English learning effortCrosstabulation**

group	Excellent	Count	English learning effort				Total
			Very hard	Hard	general	Not at all	
Excellent	Count	8	7	4	0	19	
	Expected Count	1.2	4.0	13.3	.5	19.0	
	% within	42.1%	36.8%	21.1%	.0%	100.0%	
Average	Count	8	28	73	4	113	
	Expected Count	7.4	24.0	78.9	2.8	113.0	
	% within	7.1%	24.8%	64.6%	3.5%	100.0%	
backward	Count	0	17	94	2	113	
	Expected Count	7.4	24.0	78.9	2.8	113.0	
	% within	.0%	15.0%	83.2%	1.8%	100.0%	
Total	Count	16	52	171	6	245	
	Expected Count	16.0	52.0	171.0	6.0	245.0	
	% within	6.5%	21.2%	69.8%	2.4%	100.0%	

**Table:2-5** Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	60.175 <sup>a</sup>	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	49.564	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	37.651	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	245		

a. 5 cells (41.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .47.

### 3.2.5 Task difficulty statistics

Task difficulty is a kind of external, stable and controllable factors. Many students, especially boys always complained that English is too difficult and those who often complained are the ones who have difficulty in learning English, while those who have good English performance do not think so. This pattern is reflected in Table 2-6 below. These who select "very easy" or "easy" are more likely to do well than those who selected either "general" or "difficult." On the whole two-thirds of the secondary students studied choose "general," and half of backward students choose "difficult." This study shows that students' attitude toward the subject invariably affect their performance. Those who consider the subject difficult are more unlikely to make effort to learn, whereas those who think it is easy will have a higher tendency to give good attention to studying the subject. Thus, it is important for teachers to help students develop good attitudes toward the subject which will in turn help to boost their confidence.

**Table: 2-6** Task difficulty statistics

**Opinion on English learning difficulty Crosstabulation**

Group			i think learning English is			Total
			Very easy	General	Difficult	
Excellent	Count	7	9	3	19	
	Expected Count	2.0	10.2	6.8	19.0	
	% within	36.8%	47.4%	15.8%	100.0%	
Average	Count	11	76	26	113	
	Expected Count	12.0	60.4	40.6	113.0	
	% within	9.7%	67.3%	23.0%	100.0%	
Backward	Count	8	46	59	113	
	Expected Count	12.0	60.4	40.6	113.0	
	% within	7.1%	40.7%	52.2%	100.0%	
Total	Count	26	131	88	245	
	Expected Count	26.0	131.0	88.0	245.0	
	% within	10.6%	53.5%	35.9%	100.0%	

**Table 2-6** Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	37.059 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.701	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	25.204	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	245		

a. 1 cells (11.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.02.

### 3.3 Self-efficacy difference

Self-efficacy is raised by Bandura which refers to the speculation and judgment on individuals concerning their ability to complete a certain task. In other words, it reflects an individual's confidence in doing something. Self-efficacy affects or

determines the choice of behavior, persistence and effort in persevering in a given task. In order to reflect the students' sense of self-efficacy in English learning, questions 6,8,13, 25, 26, 31 and 32in the questionnaire were designed to address this matter. Self-efficacy was also measured in the interview.

When asked "can you learn English well?" In their responses, regardless of their performance in the English language tests, all the students indicated they could, although none of them answer the question with confidence. When being asked, "Do you have confidence in learning English well?", all the average and below average students chose "No" as their response. Only 70% top students answer "Yes". To the question "Can you remember English words, phrases and sentence patterns in a large amount and use it flexibly?" most average and backward students chose "No" for an answer. The statistic detail can be seen in the following Table: 2-7

**Table 2-7** Self-efficacy statistics

**I can learn English Cross tabulation**

		I can learn English			Total
		Very well	General	bad	
Group excellent	Count	11	7	1	19
	Expected Count	1.6	9.6	7.8	19.0
	% within	57.9%	36.8%	5.3%	100.0%
Average	Count	8	82	23	113
	Expected Count	9.7	57.2	46.1	113.0
	% within	7.1%	72.6%	20.4%	100.0%
backward	Count	2	35	76	113
	Expected Count	9.7	57.2	46.1	113.0
	% within	1.8%	31.0%	67.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	21	124	100	245
	Expected Count	21.0	124.0	100.0	245.0
	% within	8.6%	50.6%	40.8%	100.0%

**Table:2-7** Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	117.233	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	92.735	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	76.749	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	245		

a. 1 cells (11.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.63.

### 3.4 Classroom behavior and study strategies analysis

#### 3.4.1 Classroom behavior analysis

Question 6 and 7 in Questionnaire mainly investigated students' participation and thinking in English class. The three groups of excellent, average and below average students show a decreasing trend. In response to questions 6(which states, "In the English classroom, I usually"), 68.4% of the top students chose answer option A (which states, "Have a good grasp of the answer after careful thinking"); while only 38.9% of the below average students selected this option. More than 70% of the top students can pay attention and are actively engaged with subject matter the teacher is teaching. This statistic is much higher than 42.5% of average student and 16.17% of below average students. Also, top students have some good habits that average or below average students do not have in English language class.

#### 3.4.2 Study Strategies Analysis

Good learning habits and study strategies can promote effective learning in students. For example of good learning strategies include previewing, reviewing, recalling, Knowledge filtering, and knowledge constructing. In order to know whether there are some differences in learning strategies between the three groups, we designed an investigation on

some study strategies, such as Cognitive strategies, memory strategies, compensation strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. The findings from these are displayed in Table 2-8 below:

**Table 2-8** Statistical table of learning strategies

	habit	memory	cognitive	compensation	Meta-cognitive	emotion	social
Total	3.21	2.98	3.19	3.38	2.81	3.03	2.81
excellent	3.77	3.16	3.53	3.68	3.34	3.49	3.23
average	3.29	3.03	3.2	3.39	2.88	3.09	2.9
backward	3.01	2.8	2.9	3.29	2.57	2.77	2.64

The level of strategy use of high school students in Grade 2 is generally not high, among which meta-cognitive strategies and social strategies are the lowest. The use of compensation strategies and affective strategies are relatively higher than the mentioned other two. The excellent student group can usually use cognitive strategies and compensation strategies well. Level at which the average student group use these learning strategies lies between that of the excellent and below average student groups and it approximates median point for overall student sample population. The level learning strategy usage of the below average student group is generally low; only their use of the compensation strategies comes close to the overall student sample population average. That means promoting the tactic using level of all students has great significance for improving student's learning capacities.

#### 4. Strategies for Improving Different Groups Study Efficiency

From above research and discussion, we can see that students in different groups have some differences in confidence, self-efficiency, effort, habit and study strategies. So to improve students' performance, they must, among other things, be helped to improve on the various learning strategies. We must admit that all students have their shortcomings in studying English language in class, including the excellent student group. Therefore, if teachers could help every student identify their weak points and work to overcome them, the student will have a higher chance of having rapid progress in learning experience. For example, there is no need for students in the excellent group to be repeating exercises they already know; rather they should save time and focus on areas they have deficiency or move on to new topics. The average students need to be helped in correcting and mastering areas they failed in their tests or have difficult in mastering. This would require teachers to grade homework and quizzes and return them to students on time and create time to go over the difficult areas with students so that they will have a second chance learn what they failed to learn in the first instance. The challenges of the below average students are numerous, and as such they need greater attention. They certainly would need more time than the usual class time, perhaps, creating a separate time for tutorials with them will be more helpful, so that they could tutored and coached through the aspects they find most challenging. For example, during tutorials, these weak students will have more time for vocabulary and conjugation paradigm drills, which will in turn help them with memorizing and recalling that are very critical in language learning. Besides it will help to "learn to organize materials and assignments, pay attention in class, do homework on time, and develop a long-term study plan to help absorbing as much information as possible, ask parents, teachers, or an outside tutor for extra help." All in all, the best teaching is to find the problem of different groups through discussing with students, carrying out needs analysis, prompting students to reflect on their learning experiences, creating work groups (Teaching mixed class, 2016) and providing them with the relevant guidance that will empower them identify and overcome the challenges to their English language learning programme.

#### 5. Acknowledgement

This article is the achievement of the National Science Education 1025 planning key project: excellent teacher training effectiveness "value-added" evaluation research, approval number: DIA150318

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